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ABSTRACT

This speech focuses on the thesis that most good teachers cannot explain the psychological principles underlying their sound teaching practices. They appear to be unaware of the large body of theoretical and experimental evidence supporting one educational procedure over another. Through reference to a film showing a teacher teaching social studies teaching methods are reviewed in their theoretical framework; including such methods as setting the stage for learning, creating a democratic classroom environment, establishing continuity (Gestalt psychology), removing the immediate blocks to learning, using supplementary materials, and designing assignments with the children. Using these methods and others a teacher sets the stage for the child to do his own learning. (ED)

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RELATING PSYCHOLOGY AND PRACTICE: Relating Some Psychological Principles to a Lesson Given at the A.P. Hill School. [Keturah E. Whitehurst]

Dr. Harris, Dr. Colson, Fellow Teachers:

I am not usually eager to speak on programs, but when Dr. Colson explained to me the aims of this program and asked me to give the keynote address, I did not hesitate to accept. My readiness to accept was not due to any delusion about my own eloquence in speech-making. Rather, I was motivated by a long-standing desire to have teachers become articulate about the principles of psychology that underlie sound teaching practices.

Year after year we offer courses in human development, learning theory, general psychology, social psychology, and mental hygiene. Year after year our teachers pursue their classroom responsibilities as if the insights gained in these courses have no relationship to the teaching-learning process. This is not to say that good teaching does not go on. What impresses me is that, with few exceptions good teachers cannot explain the principles underlying their practices. They appear to be unaware of the large body of theoretical and experimental evidence supporting one educational procedure as opposed to another. When asked why they choose one method rather than another they are likely to say "Because this is the latest method" or " "It's the newest thing in education today." Perhaps we should change the sequence in our instruction and have students do their student teaching first. Then they might be better motivated to find the principles when they take the psychology courses.

You have just viewed a film showing Mr. Collins teaching a social studies lesson on the Westward Movement at the A. P. Hill School. It is

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the kind of lesson that might occur at any school. The children were not individually chosen for the film. The class is a regularly constituted one, and the pupils were unrehearsed for the film. I want to use this demonstration to point out several psychological principles on which the lesson was built. These principles have been derived from learning theory, from Gestalt psychology, from social psychology and from mental hygiene.

You noticed that, in the film, Mr. Collins spent the entire teaching period setting the stage for learning. It is the thesis of this presentation that the teacher's function is to set the stage, and that the pupil must do his own learning. How did Mr. Collins set the stage? First, he himself, was prepared. There is no substitute for teacher preparation. His thorough preparation freed him to be spontaneous, perceptive and enthusiastic in the classroom.

Now enthusiasm is contagious as any student of social psychology will attest. It is an emotional state easily diffused throughout a group by a leader who engages every member in the group enterprise. In this film, the group enterprise is learning about the West. The teacher, having already made the intellectual adventure, can serve as an experienced guide who knows where the dangers lurk and where the thrills and excitement wait.

As a group leader, the teacher plays the major role in creating the classroom climate. I am sure you were impressed by the happy faces, spontaneous show of hands, the eager postures, and at times the outburst of answers. It is not far from this classroom to the insights gained from the

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classic study of social climates by Lewin, Lippit and White. Of the three climates experimentally created (autocratic, laissez-faire, and democratic) it was the democratic that produced such behavior as demonstrated in the film. Every child was recognized and rewarded for his contribution. Success, not failure, was "in the air." From the point of view of mental hygiene, this was a healthy climate, a wholesome climate in which to grow.

The next step was to establish continuity with the previous lesson by a brief review so that the pupils could see and appreciate the relevance of today's lesson. According to Gestalt psychologists, meaningful relationships foster insight which is the crux of efficient learning. Too often, we teach each day's lesson as a thing in itself as if it has no relationship whatsoever to what has gone before or to what will come after. Small wonder, then, that the pupil never "gets the connection" or sees the purpose of his day-to-day assignments. When he sees the over-all plan, then short term assignments can gather their meaningfulness from the total pattern.

Not only does Gestalt psychology demand continuity but programmed instruction does also. Review and interlocking of steps insure consolidation of gains and there is a firmer command of prior learning before moving on to the logical next-step. Mr. Collins carefully explained the connection between yesterday's work and today's assignment. Research in the area of transfer of training undergirds this procedure. Transfer should never be left to chance; we must teach explicitly for it.

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When the purposes and goals of a lesson are made clear to highly motivated pupils, we are ready to remove the immediate blocks to learning. The blocks to learning include (1) lack of understanding of words, (2) inadequate concepts, (3) inability to read maps, (4) inability to interpret charts, (5) lack of proper and sufficient source materials, (6) unclear, indefinite, and undifferentiated assignments.

How did Mr. Collins proceed to remove the blocks to learning? He first selected certain key words that, in his opinion, were likely to give trouble. The words are crucial to the understanding of the geography, the mission, the hardships of the westward movement. Accurate concepts are the building blocks for full understanding and accurate interpretation of what is read.

Furthermore, the reading matter was illustrated and supplemented by maps and charts on the principle that learning is a multiple process and is best achieved through multiple stimulation. This is the major principle underlying the use of audio-visual and construction materials. What do colors signify in a map? How are boundaries, rivers, plains and mountains indicated? What are the anchorage points of orientation? What is the spatial difference between "mid-west" and "far west"? It should be noted that the pupil with reading difficulties can learn from a map or chart much of what the competent readers learn from the text. Thus, the principle of individual differences is served.

Pictures, too, can be an effective aid to learning when the pupils are taught how to "read" the pictures and how to ask good questions about them. By studying the picture of a wagon train pupils can make certain

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inferences about the westward movement: such as, the west was hostile country or why would the travelers keep their guns handy? Some of the travelers planned to stay because they brought along everything they possessed: they became the settlers. It was a long time ago because diesel trains, trucks, buses and airplanes have long since replaced wagon trains.

Having removed the blocks by developing certain learning tools and techniques, the teacher has a planning session in which all the children participate. They know the over-all task; they know how to approach the solution to problems inherent in the task. Now they must decide individual responsibilities in carrying out the job. Note how readily the pupils volunteered for particular assignments. Note also that each volunteer chose what he felt he could do. Two psychological principles should be pointed out as operating in the choice of assignments; one is that there is a greater sense of commitment to plans that the pupil has participated in making than to externally imposed plans; the other is that pupils, recognizing their abilities and limitations, tend to set their aspirations at challenging but attainable levels. Pupils are capable of serious commitment to goals they understand and have accepted as their own.

The stage is now set for further study. The answers are not given; they must be sought. The tools of inquiry and problem-solving have been developed. Motivation is toward clearly accepted goals and definitely assigned tasks. The teacher has created a learning climate that fosters initiative and self-confidence. Tension toward completion of the unfinished

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task has been created. In short, the stage has been set and the blocks to learning removed. Now, the pupil, himself, must do his own learning.

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